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Historic Schenectady - Founded 1661



Van Curler views the site of Schenectady

Three Centuries of Life in Schenectady

Although the Dutch flag flew over Schenectady for only three years, the Dutch influence of its first settlers has been felt for three centuries. They constructed their high-gabled houses close to the street on deep, narrow lots with gardens in the rear. No buildings built before the massacre of 1690 have survived to the present time, but notable examples of Dutch architecture from about 1700 are still to be seen in the city and nearby. Later generations favored different styles of architecture but they continued for a long while to build their houses close to the street on comparatively narrow lots. Besides tradition, the presence of a stockade around the town for the first century and a quarter of its existence impelled the inhabitants to keep their houses close together.

Contrary to a widely held belief, the early Dutch did not build their houses of brick imported from Holland. Most houses were built of wood. If desired, good brick was available locally without being transported across the ocean. Nor did they, in Schenectady, use crow-steps at the ends coming down from ridge to eaves. But the roofs were steeply sloping as in the cities from which the first settlers had come, with the gable ends towards the street.

After about 1750 the Dutch style of building was superseded by the English Georgian style with the ridge pole parallel to the street. Houses of this type — some large, some small — are still numerous.

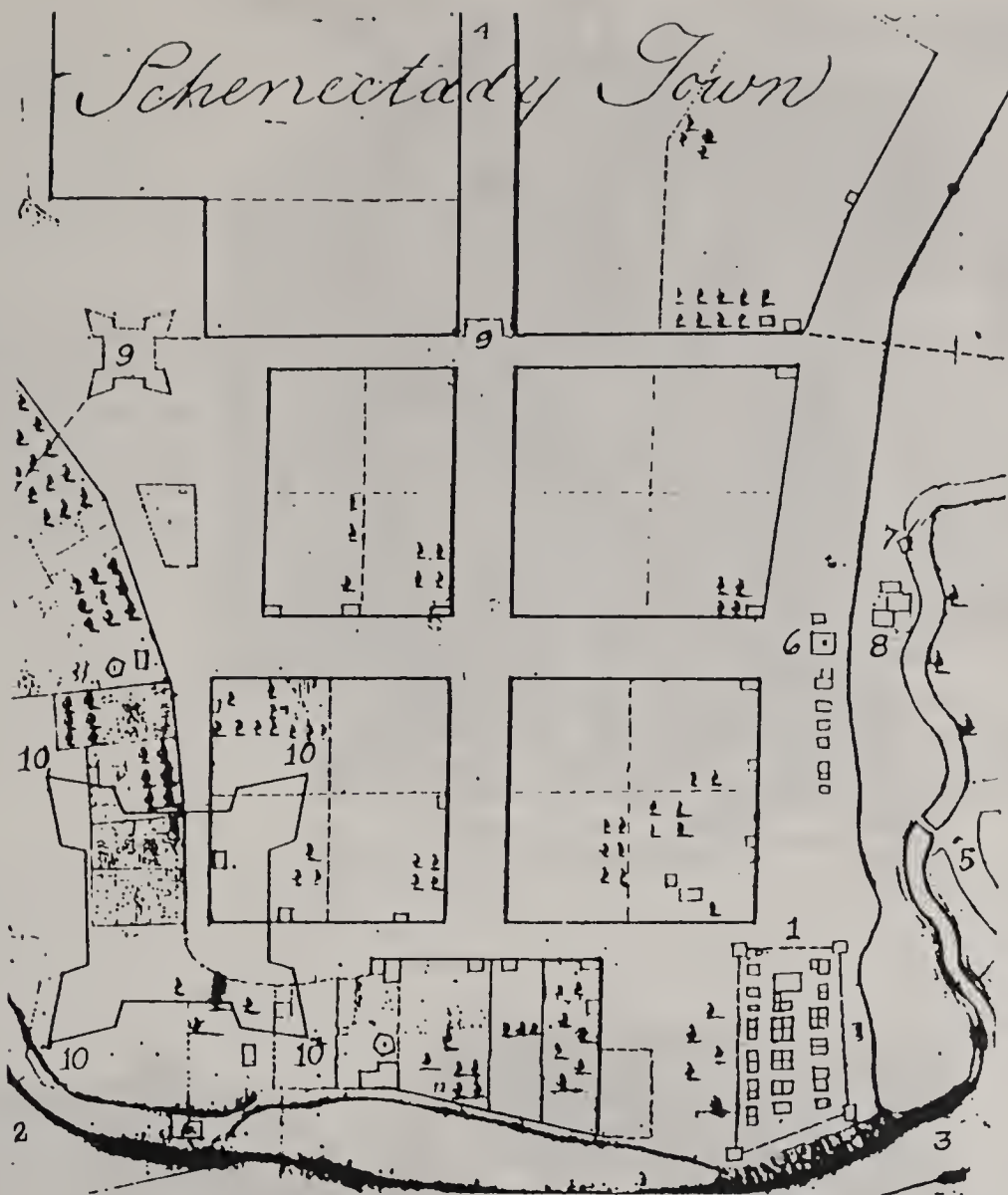
In 1819 a great fire destroyed more than a hundred buildings within the old stockade area. The business district of the town was virtually wiped out. When it was rebuilt, a new location was selected further "uptown". Thus the stockade area was left almost completely residential — and so it has remained, changing slowly with the years, but retaining a remarkable number of its historic old houses. Today more than 40 buildings in this area display the date markers of the Schenectady County Historical Society indicating construction before 1825. A number of others display markers erected by the State of New York.

A revival of interest in classical architecture occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century. Schenectady had numerous examples of this style, mostly outside the stockade area, which had been rather solidly built up before the advent of this influence. Union College reflects the architectural style of the classical revival.

Later came the vogue of Victorian architecture. The simple lines of preceding periods were replaced by turrets, towers, bay windows and elaborate decorations. This style was widely employed for new buildings, and older structures were frequently embellished with ornate novelties. More recently there has been a trend toward the removal of these embellishments and a return to the simplicity of earlier days.

Commenting on Schenectady's heritage of historic buildings, the quarterly bulletin of the National Trust For Historic Preservation says;

The collection of old structures in the stockade area has not been recreated, nor assembled from various locations, but the houses stand where they were built and have been in continuous use up to 200 years or more. They are not museum pieces in the sense of appearing exactly the same inside and out as they did long ago, but are living structures which have been adapted to meet changing conditions while retaining as much as possible of the original charm.



SCHENECTADY TOWN about 1698 as shown on a map by Col. Wolfgang William Romer, who had inspected the fortifications of the town on the orders of the Earl of Bellomont, Governor of New York, Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire, and found them "scandalous weak". According to Romer "the gates of the fort were down and a cart might pass through the palisades". He recommended the construction of a new fort of stone. The map is now in the Public Records Office in London, England.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. The King's Fort | 6. The Church |
| 2. The Mohacks River | 7. The Myll |
| 3. The Great Mohacks krick | 8. The Brawhouse |
| 4. The Road to Kanestegiona and halve moon | 9. An old Berned littel Fort and Palissades maede by Collonel Dongams time |
| 5. The Road to the Mohacks Contry | 10. A new Projected Fort of stone |



Earliest building in Schenectady of which a photograph is known to exist was the BRADT HOUSE on lower State Street. Believed to have been built before the 1690 massacre, it was demolished about 1900.



JAN MABIE HOUSE a few miles west of the city on Route 5S is said to have been built before 1700. It is the oldest building now standing in the Mohawk Valley.



The first house at this location, 109 Union Street, was burned in the 1690 massacre. The present ABRAHAM YATES HOUSE was built in the early eighteenth century. The architecture is Dutch with gable-end to the street. An extension to the east was added after the original structure was built.



HENDRICK BROUWER HOUSE built in the early 1700's at what is now 14 North Church Street was the home of a fur trader known for his fairness to the Indians. The present house is a combination of several parts including a steep roofed Dutch structure at the rear. Possibly the latter is even older than 1700.



GLEN-SANDERS MANSION built in 1713 by Johannes Glen, son of Alexander Lindsay Glen, first settler in the Mohawk Valley. The house is still standing at the Scotia end of the Western Gateway Bridge.



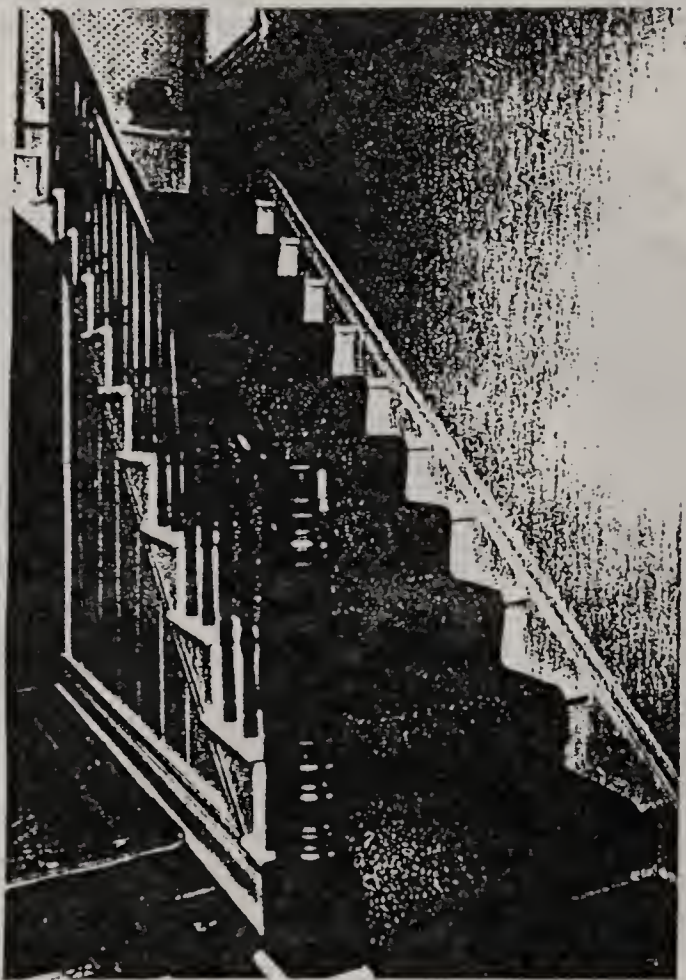
Bedroom of the GLEN-SANDERS MANSION restored in the style of the early eighteenth century when the house was built.



The first edifice of the Reformed Nether DUTCH CHURCH was built about 1682 at the junction of State and Church Streets. A second edifice replaced the first on the same site in 1703. The third edifice, shown in this sketch made by A. Wild in the latter part of the nineteenth century, was completed in 1734 at the intersection of Church and Union Streets.



JOHANNES TELLER HOUSE at 121 Front Street was built about 1740. It is of brick construction and is one of the few remaining early houses with a gambrel roof.



Side by side at 29 and 31 Front Street stand the ABRAHAM FONDA HOUSE, built 1752, and the ISAAC VROOMAN HOUSE, built 1754. Abraham Fonda was a son of Jellis one of the early settlers of the town. Isaac Vrooman was the first mayor of Schenectady and a surveyor. He prepared an interesting map of the area "at the request of His Excellency George Washington Esqr. General and Commander in Chief of all the Land and Naval Forces of the Thirteen United States of America". At left — stairway in the Abraham Fonda House.

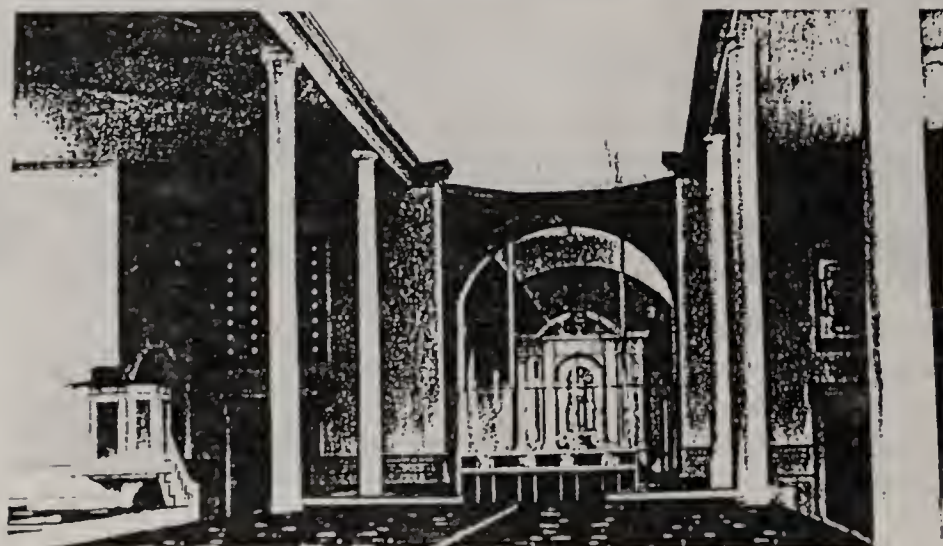
ADRIAN VAN SLYCK HOUSE at 114 Front Street (right) was built in the 1740's by the leader of militia, killed in the battle of Beukendall, 1748. It is a typical example of early Dutch architecture. The smaller SYMON SPECK HOUSE (left) was built considerably earlier and moved to its present location about 1795.



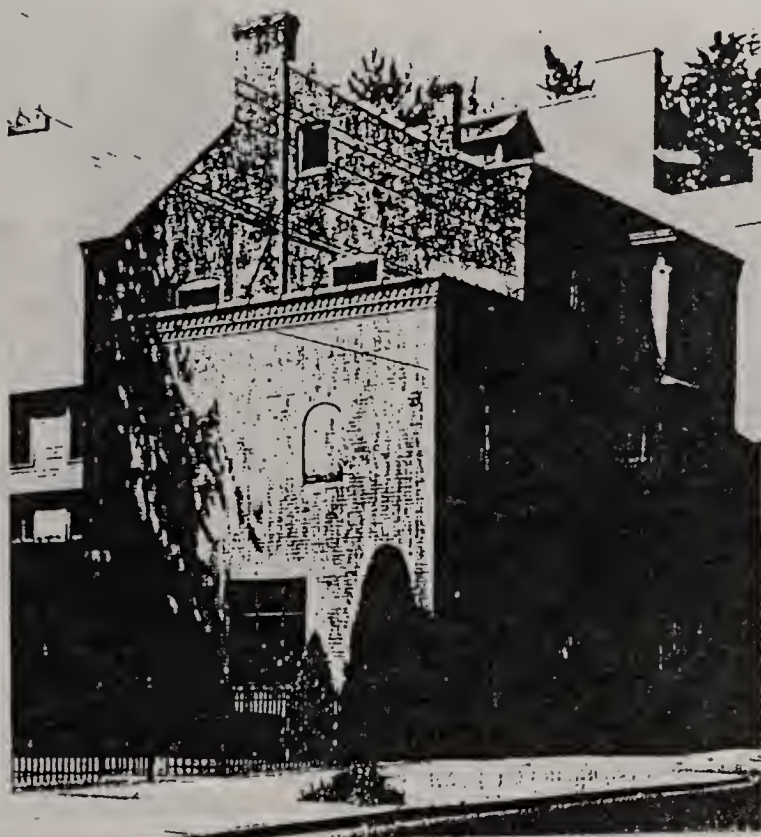
Side by side on Front Street are to be seen (left to right) the GOVERNOR YATES HOUSE 1760, the GENERAL JACOB SWITS HOUSE ca 1790, the HENRY ROSA HOUSE remodeled 1878, the JOHN MARSELIS HOUSE ca 1750 and the JEREMIAH DEGRAAF HOUSE ca 1790, exemplifying a variety of architectural styles popular in Schenectady at different periods.



Ground was broken in 1759 for the building that is now ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH on North Ferry Street. The small, square, stone walled structure first built forms the nave of the present greatly enlarged building. During the Revolution services were suspended and the church was used for a time as a barracks for troops. In 1793 it was renovated and a wooden tower and steeple were added. The church was enlarged in 1838 and again in 1859. The stone tower replaced the wood tower in 1871. The year 1953 witnessed a remodeling that restored the Colonial atmosphere of the interior.



A brick dated 1765 in the east wall suggests the date when the ALEXANDER TRUAX HOUSE at 206 Union Street was built. Originally two stories in height, the house had a third story added in the nineteenth century. It is said that it was then the first three-story brick dwelling in Schenectady.



The JOHN GLEN HOUSE at 58 Washington Ave. built about 1765, was the home of the Deputy Quartermaster General of the Army during the French and Indian wars. George Washington was entertained here on his visit to Schenectady in 1783. The third story and the bay window are additions to the original structure.



At 26 Front Street stands the BIRTHPLACE OF GOVERNOR JOSEPH C. YATES. Part of the present building is said to have been constructed in 1735. Fifty years later it was modernized and greatly enlarged. In 1891 the entire front and much of the interior was remodeled in Victorian style. The photograph shows the appearance of the house before the remodeling.

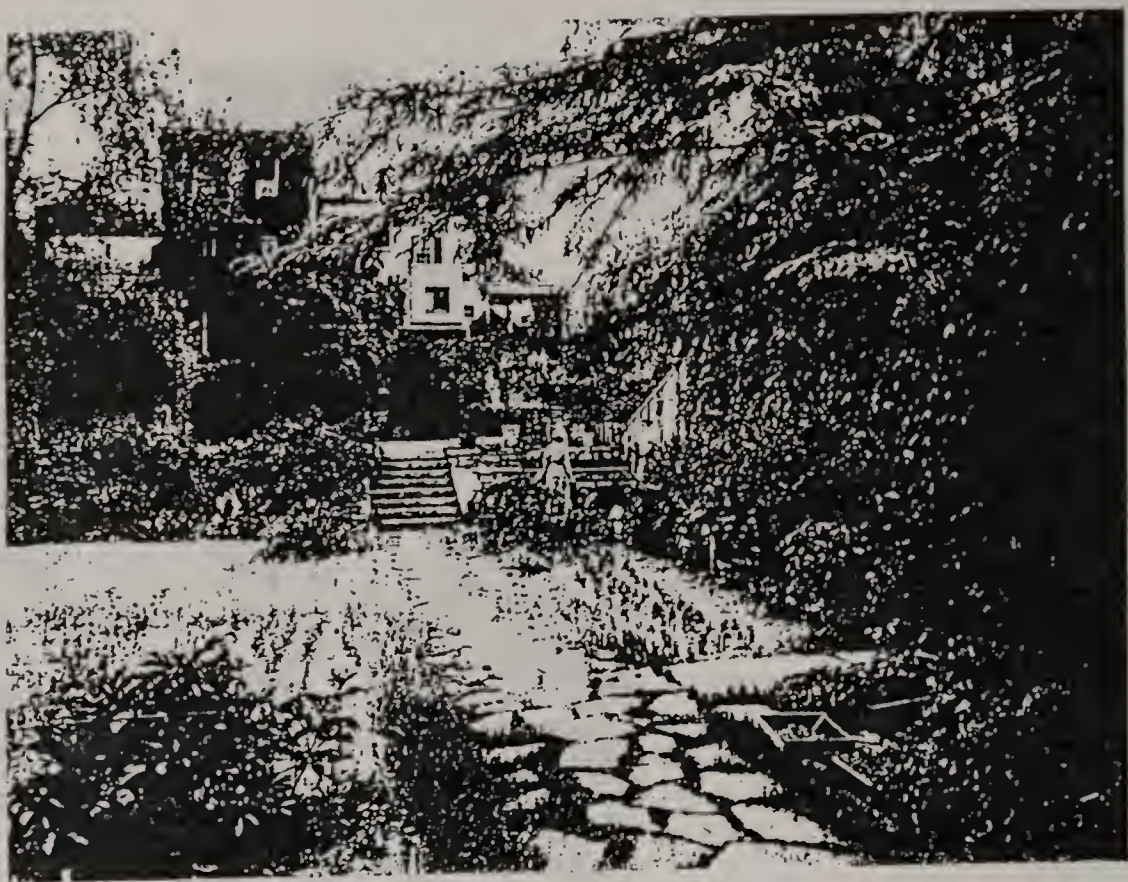


This house at 10 North Church Street, built in the early 1780's, but now considerably changed in appearance, was for many years the STORE OF ALEXANDER MERCER. A memorandum concerning George Washington's "journey to the westward" in 1783 contains a notation that certain supplies for the trip were bought August 5 of that year from Alexander Mercer at Schenectady, presumably at this store.

Doorway of the JOHN YATES HOUSE at 20-22 North Church Street. Originally these two houses were a single dwelling with a center door. The property belonged to the Yates family as early as 1737, but the house was probably not built until about 1790.



JEREMIAH FULLER HOUSE at the northwest corner of Front and Church streets was built in 1795 with later additions along the Front Street side. It was demolished in 1951 to provide land for a parking lot. Jeremiah was the son of Samuel Fuller, an architect of wide renown who designed many buildings in Schenectady including St. George's Church, the Governor Yates House and the John Glen House.



Many houses on the north side of Front Street and the west side of Washington Avenue have gardens in the rear running down almost to the Mohawk River or the Binne Kill. Above is the garden of the University Club, formerly the GOVERNOR YATES HOUSE, built in 1761. Smaller but equally colorful gardens like this at 19 Washington Avenue are found elsewhere throughout the area.



THE JEREMIAH DE-
GRAAF HOUSE at 25-27
Front Street, built about 1790,
occupies the site of an inn
operated by Jacob Cromwell
at an earlier date. The origi-
nal double house was later
divided into two houses. The
doorway of No. 25, shown
at the right, and the stair-
way shown below were parts
of the original structure.



This small building at 10 North Ferry Street was built about 1790. For many years it was the home and STORE OF THE WIDOW KENDALL, where she sold cakes and ale. the doorway was probably modified to its present appearance during the first part of the nineteenth century.



Dining room fireplace in the GENERAL JACOB SWITS HOUSE at 19 Front Street. The exact date when this house was built is not known. It was purchased by that Revolutionary soldier in 1792 for 115 pounds.



The cornerstone of the present building of the FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (left) was laid in 1809. Its simple Georgian design is characteristic of the best church architecture of this period. A small wooden church is said to have stood on the Union Street end of the property before the construction of the present building.

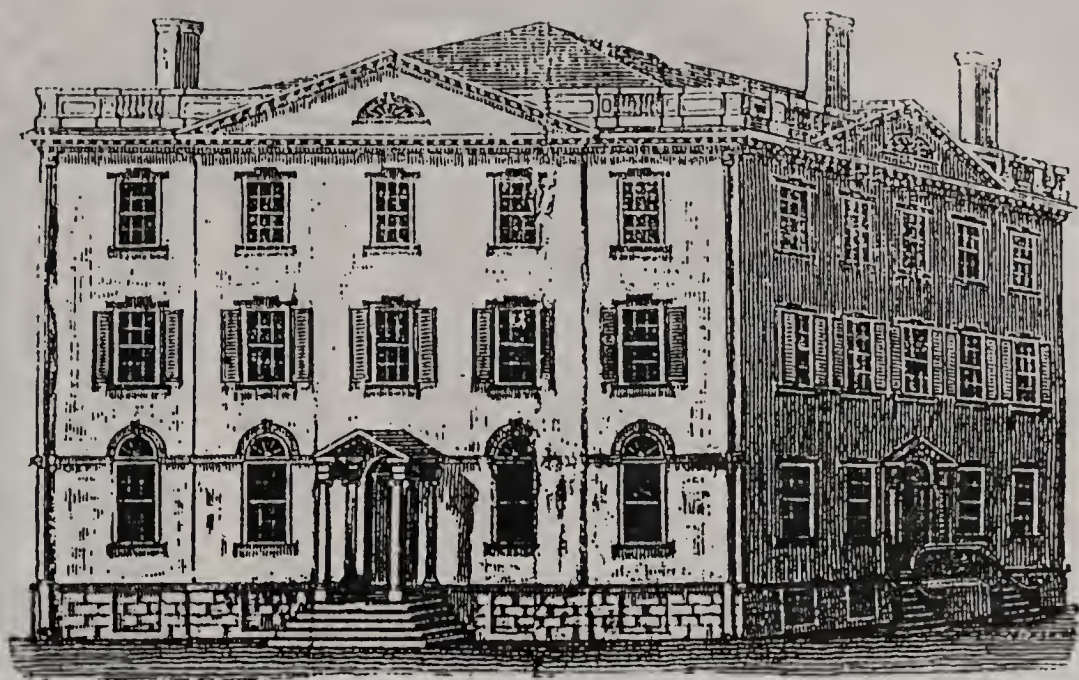
DUANE HOUSE (below) a few miles outside the city at Duaneburg was built in the Greek revival style for Catherine Livingston Duane in 1812. Later it was inherited by George W. Featherstonhaugh, a leader in the building of the Mohawk & Hudson Railroad.





The oldest buildings on UNION COLLEGE campus were built when Union moved uptown from its earlier site at Union and College Streets. At left is shown South College, designed in 1813. North College, below, was constructed a few years later. The faculty house at the north corner of North College was long the home of Dr. Eliphalet Nott, president of Union. The architecture is an adaptation of the classical style, making extensive use of the blind colonnade for ornament.





Built in 1816 for the MOHAWK BANK, and now the home of the Mohawk Club, this building stands on what was originally the town lot of Arendt Van Curler, leader of the group who founded Schenectady in 1661. During the latter part of the nineteenth century it housed the Union Classical Institute which became the Schenectady High School.



This brick house at 48 Washington Avenue is said to have been built a few years before Benjamin Mumford purchased the property in 1817. In the November 24, 1819, issue of the Schenectady Cabinet appeared a statement of thanks from him to the citizens and the students of Union College for their help in saving the house from destruction during the great fire of that year.

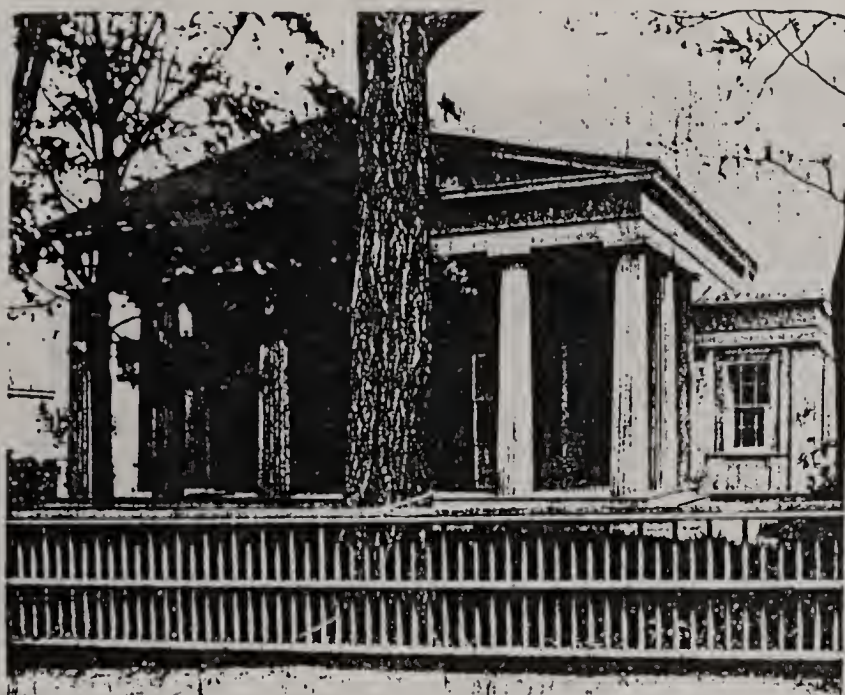


The OLD COUNTY COURT HOUSE at 108 Union Street, now the headquarters of the city's Education Department, was built in 1833 in the then popular Greek style.

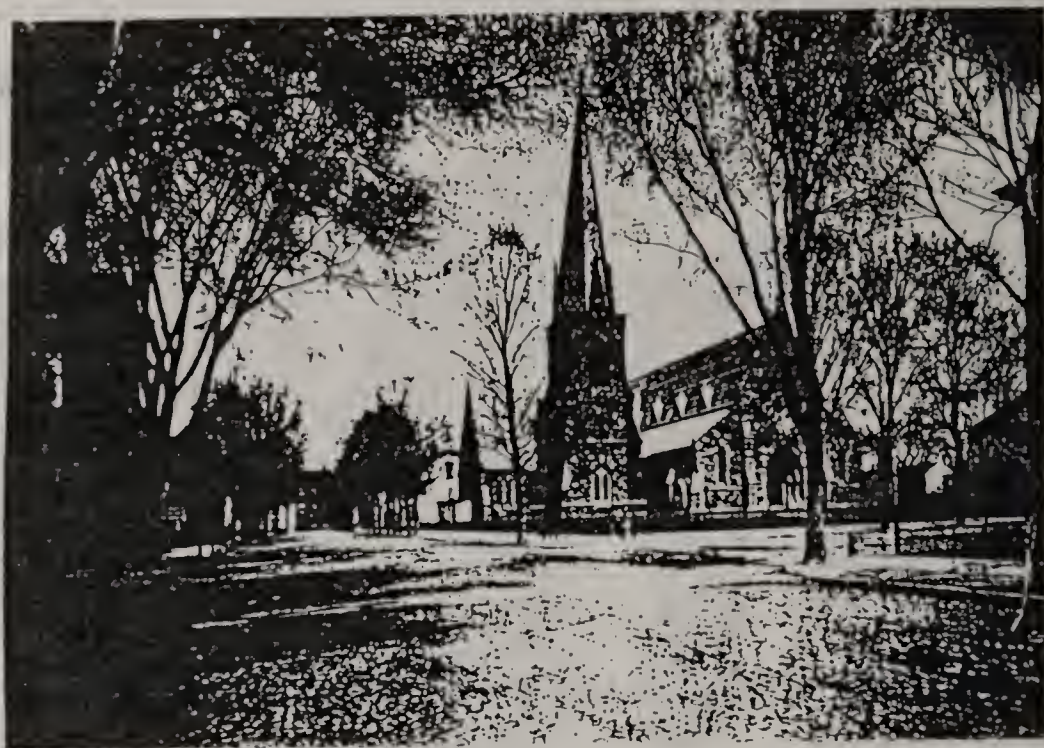


At 1, 3, and 5 Washington Ave stand the DAVID HERSEY and JACOB VROOMAN houses. The former was built by the toll-keeper of the Scotia Bridge shortly after the great fire of 1819. The latter was built in 1835 on the site of an earlier house.

The FRANCIS FISKE HOUSE at 711 Union Street was built in the late 1830's. The front was later extended toward the street without substantial modification of the architectural style.



Professor JONATHAN PEARSON of Union College, noted historian and writer, built this replica of a Greek temple at 713 Union Street in 1838 and lived there for many years. Later it was destroyed by fire.



FIRST REFORMED CHURCH at Union and Church Streets, completed in 1862, replaced the church built in 1814 on the same site and burned in the great fire of August 1861. Another fire in 1949 did extensive damage, but the church was rebuilt using the same walls.



At 201 Union Street stands the Dr. B. F. CARMICHAEL HOUSE built about 1880 on the corner where stood for many years the old store of Pop Sickles. The Mansard roofed architecture of the present house is typical of many built during the Victorian period.



YOUNG WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION BUILDING on Washington Avenue opposite the end of Union Street was completed in 1931. The Georgian style of architecture was selected to harmonize with the styles of adjacent buildings.



A tavern known as the ELEVEN O'CLOCK HOUSE occupied this site at 35-37 Front Street for more than a hundred years. Early in the Twentieth century a plain red brick apartment house replaced the old tavern. In 1961 this was extensively remodeled, to be in keeping with the surrounding buildings.



Entrance court of ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH SCHOOL built in 1958. Its architecture was planned to be in harmonious relationship with the 200-year old church and the somewhat Georgian style of the rectory on the north side of the churchyard.

BULLETIN OF THE SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

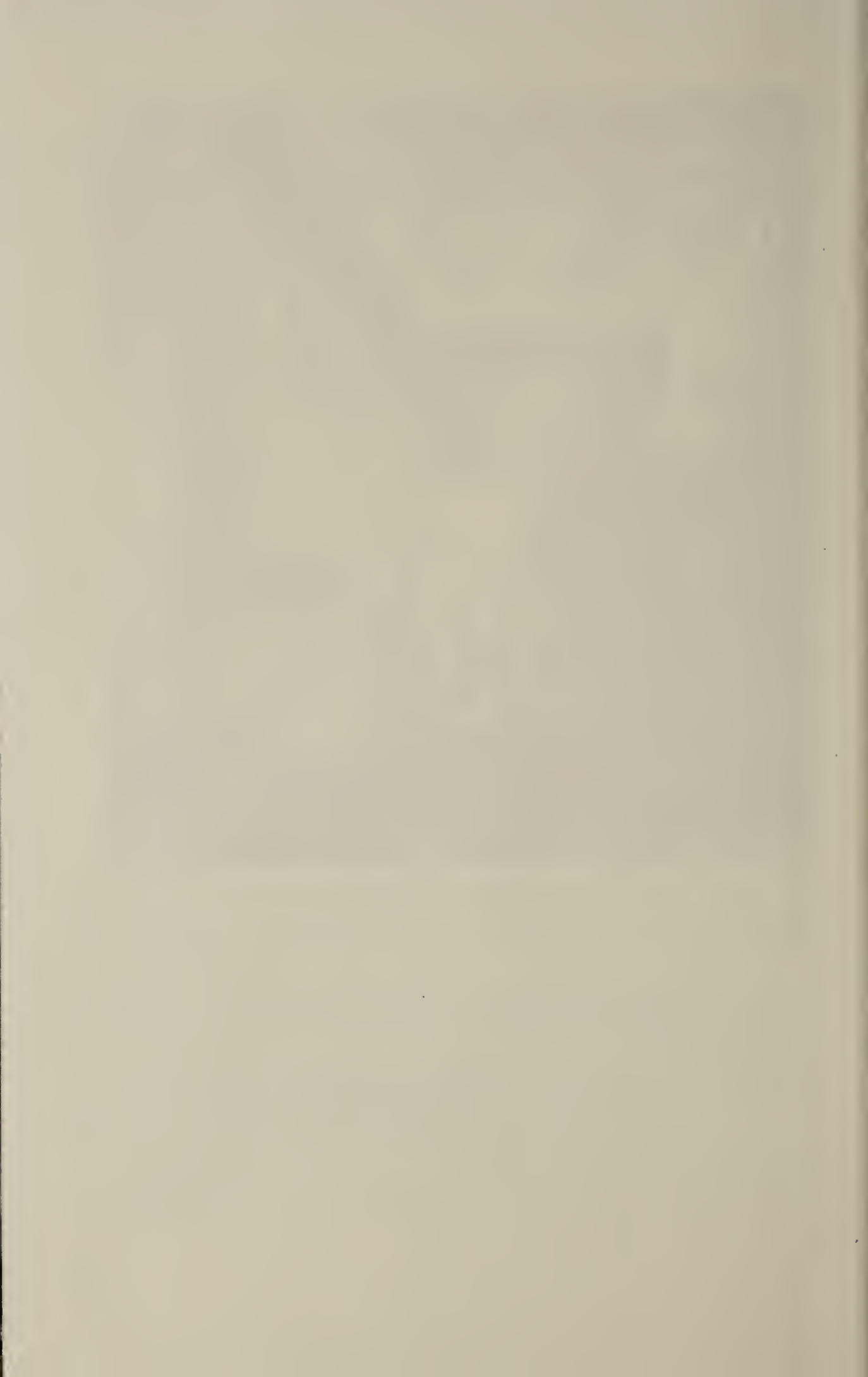
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